

Flanders Cultural Nebular City

Cultural infrastructure in a Horizontal Urban Landscape

(in: Katrien Vandermarliere (red.) *Flanders Architectural Yearbook 2002-2003*, Antwerpen, Vlaams Architectuur Instituut (VAi), 2004, pp. 71-80.)

Wouter Davidts

“Passaic centre loomed like a dull adjective. Each ‘store’ in it was an adjective unto the next, a chain of adjectives disguised as stores. ... Actually, Passaic centre was no centre – instead it was a typical abyss or an ordinary void. What a great place for a gallery! Or maybe an ‘outdoor sculpture show’ would pep that place up!”

Robert Smithson

In his 1967 essay *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, the artist Robert Smithson reports on his trip to Passaic, a place in the suburbs of New Jersey.¹ Smithson lyrically describes the generic character of the post-industrial landscape he encounters on his ‘suburban Odyssey’. Passaic doesn’t offer picturesque views, iconic buildings or relics of a glorious past, only a juxtaposition of places and things that rival each other in their dullness and insignificance. This bit of suburbia exists without the “big events” of history. Nor does it have an illustrious future. According to Smithson it is doomed to bathe in a lethargic present. All you can find are “memory traces of an abandoned set of futures”. The only monuments Smithson discerns in the “zero panorama” of Passaic vary from a rusty steel bridge, a pumping derrick with a set of pontoons, a sand-box, gushing pipes to an extensive asphalt car lot. In comparison with the urban density of New York, the peripheral Passaic seems full of “holes”. It does not have a centre: it is both unoccupied and absent. It triggers Smithson’s imagination. The vacant centre is the perfect location for an art gallery. Or, even better, the ideal remedy for its lifelessness is an open-air exhibition.

Building a cultural image

At the start of the 21st century, there’s not much irony left in Smithson’s proposal. All over the world, art – or culture in general – is used as a lubricant for the revitalisation of post-industrial cities. To reanimate their centres, many cities no longer call upon their industrial or economic potential. Their capital has become ever more symbolic. Profitable cities need a specific image or profile, preferably cultural, commercial or recreational in nature. Since the early eighties, all manner of cultural programmes – infrastructure and/or festivities – have been employed to breathe new life into city centres and put the sparkle back in their faded blazons. Many cultural institutions – headed by art museums – originate from the conviction and the wish that they can pep up the reputation of a city. Since the erection of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao city officials know the success formula: take the decision to build a new cultural institution, seek a strategic spot in the city, organise a large-scale

architectural competition between the stars of the architectural firmament, and ultimately choose the design with the greatest iconic appeal. A competition that results in a signed landmark elicits considerable attention from the local, national and international press, perhaps even public controversy and, later, undoubtedly the expected tourism dynamic and the desired economic yield. A prestigious and powerful building such as the Guggenheim Bilbao puts a city 'on the world map'. Moreover, the building and the city are constantly identified with one another. Whenever one mentions 'Bilbao', the building is always implied. The building operates as the icon, the sign and the logo of the city, all at once.

Buildings are not the only means of peppering-up waning city centres. For a few years there has also been an increasing 'festivalisation' of urban development. Such temporary events as world exhibitions, Olympic Games, football championships and cultural festivals provide the opportunity to focus on the 'unique assets' of a city, for a short time but with great intensity. Moreover, these events often function as a lever to realize missing urban or cultural infrastructure, such as a new subway line, a sports stadium, a station, a museum, a theatre or a concert hall. By means of an architectural competition the whole building process is guaranteed a place within the event logic. After all, a competition is an event in itself. A disgruntled participant, a controversial selection by the jury or a scandalised public may transform a competition into a real happening that, long before the actual event starts, is extensively covered by the media. Many still remember the public uproar concerning the competition for the Concert Hall in Bruges. But any forthcoming festival can use a little controversy. It draws attention and lets everyone know that something is about to happen.²

Over the last two years the Flemish architectural landscape has been enriched by a notable number of projects with a cultural programme or which ensue from a cultural event: the ModeNatie and the Winkelhaak design centre in Antwerp, the STUK in Leuven, the Beursschouwburg in Brussels, a temporary bridge for Anno '02 in Kuurne, and the Concert Hall, the pavilion and the pedestrian bridge for Brugge 2002. This range of projects raises several questions. It seems to insinuate that Flanders too is plagued by a cultural building boom. But is this really the case? Are we dealing with a trend? Do we really have a tradition in using prestigious cultural projects as city-marketing trumps? How does Belgium in general relate to its neighbours when it comes to cultural infrastructure and festivities? Aren't we fearfully attempting to catch up?

Museum Architecture in Flanders?

There has never been anything like a 'museum boom' in Belgium. On the contrary, 'museum aversion' would befit us more. Compared to the neighbouring countries, which are undeniable leaders in this museum boom, the Belgian crop is rather thin. There is not a single Belgian city that is the proud owner of a prominent museum building by a well-known 'museum architect' like Alvaro Siza, Renzo Piano, Richard Meier, Frank Gehry or Hans Hollein. In the 1995 *Contemporary Architecture in Belgium*, Geert Bekaert counts just five museums worth mentioning: the Gallo-Roman Museum in Buzenol (Constantin Brodzki, 1960), the Museum of the Scheldt and Leie Area in Deinze (J. Van Den

Bogaerde, J. Van Driessche and H. De Witte, 1981), the Museum at Mariemont (Roger Bastin, 1967), the Museum of Modern Art in Brussels (Roger Bastin, 1984) and the Gallo-Roman Museum in Tongeren (Alfredo De Gregorio and Michel Jaspers, 1994).³ But none of these are architectural *tour de force*, let alone projects with an international reputation. Belgian officials refused to seize the opportunities. One might almost suspect them of wanting to distance themselves from the museum boom. Why else did they, at such a strategic location as the Kunstberg in Brussels, bury a whole museum underground; and why else are the three museums of contemporary art housed in lamentable existing buildings – a supermarket, a grain silo and a casino? In a previous yearbook, Steven Jacobs rightly described the conversion of the Provincial Museum of Modern Art in Ostend (PMMK, F. Sohier and I. Morel, 1982 & 1990), the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp (MuHKA, Michel Grandsard, 1987 & 1993) and the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent (SMAK, Koen van Nieuwenhuyse, 1999) as “a grotesque string of freaks.”⁴ Prominent Belgian architects were forced go abroad to get important museum commissions. Robbrecht and Daem transformed an old railway roundhouse into a showcase for the excellent Hauser & Wirth contemporary art collection in Sankt Gallen, designed the extension to the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam and are working on the future expansion of the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London; Stéphane Beel designed the extension to the Central Museum in Utrecht. Beel also designed the only newcomer worth mentioning in Belgium: the monographic museum for Roger Raveel in the artist's native village of Machelen-aan-de-Leie. Here too, the international trends were challenged. The Flemish Government ultimately decided to build a new, high-quality museum, but it is devoted to the work of a single artist and located in an unsightly village halfway along the road from Ghent to Kortrijk; not exactly a metropolitan setting. Machelen-aan-de-Leie lies ‘in the provinces’, a stone's throw from Roeselare, Tielt and Oudenaarde. You simply cannot reach it without a car.

The Raveel Museum lies in the midst of what is commonly called the Flemish ‘nebular city’. This term has been used since the early nineties to describe the morphological structure of sprawl and the horizontal urbanisation of Flanders. The classical distinction between centre and periphery, city and country, has become utterly blurred by the decentralisation of living and working. Flanders is completely covered by a misty layer of urbanity that hardly has a centre. Nowadays one finds urban amenities in hangars just as much as in old city centres. However, the term ‘nebular city’ can be used to discuss the socio-cultural landscape of Flanders too. Sprawl befits not only Flanders’ scenery, but its culture and cultural policy as well. The discursive potential of the term is threefold: it allows one to reflect on the amalgam of cultural institutions, on the accompanying infrastructure and on the overall policy.

Belgium, Flanders, etcetera

The widespread fragmentation of the cultural landscape goes back to the federalisation or decentralisation of cultural policy in Belgium in 1971. At that time the various language communities were given authority over their own cultural policy and financial resources. The consequences of this decision can still be felt in Brussels, where no less than six authorities hold sway. Any project

concerning Brussels – and therefore by definition involves several communities – is, precisely because of this lack of an all-embracing cultural policy, doomed to fail.⁵ In Flanders the situation is little better. The policy of most of its ministers of culture has always been characterised by a search for ‘broadening’. A recent Flemish Government campaign was headed with the slogan that ‘Culture is a feast for everyone’. In order to enable as many people as possible to actively experience culture, the government is investing in local initiatives and institutions. “It doesn’t always have to be *culture with a capital C*,” was the noteworthy subtitle. This credo automatically reminds us of the ideology behind one of the most remarkable cultural projects of the past: the mass construction of cultural centres in the late sixties. Even before cultural autonomy was introduced, a group of sociologists carried out an in-depth study of the cultural infrastructure throughout Flanders, not just in the major towns and cities. They inevitably came to the conclusion that it was virtually nonexistent and full of shortcomings. Stimulated by the then Flemish minister of culture, Mr Van Mechelen, a major building programme for cultural centres in small and medium-sized towns was initiated. Culture had to be brought to the people and – similar to politics, economy and education – democratised. It was against this background of cultural dissemination and the nascence of a provincial network of cultural centres that the present nebular city took shape. After homes and jobs left the core cities, the cultural centres initiated the suburbanisation and sprawl of cultural life.⁶

The cultural centre project was the first and last time the government coupled an ambitious vision with an actual investment in infrastructure (in this case new). Therefore the whole operation is even more typical of the overall policy of the Flemish Government. It has never distinguished itself when it comes to coherence. Nebulous spreading is probably more appropriate. Something for everyone: some a little more, some a little less. After all, the construction of cultural centres took place without consideration for the existing network of cultural institutions, such as theatres and museums. They represented a middle-class, asocial and elite culture and were thus neglected, although the infrastructure of the museums had always been rather restrained. In 1971 the notorious museum advocate Karel Geirlandt rightly labelled the museums the ‘Cinderellas’ of the cultural family, in terms of both resources and infrastructure.⁷ The result was that until the late eighties Flanders suffered from a structural deficiency of official exhibition spaces and that contemporary art was forced by sheer necessity onto the fringe. Before such institutions as the PMMK, MuHKA and SMAK were able to enjoy definitive and, above all, their own accommodation, they led, of necessity, a ghostlike existence in other buildings, even in other cities. As a result of political unwillingness and policy tussles, each of them suffered a series of temporary homes, successive moves and vain plans for ‘new buildings’. The three ‘conversions’ that ultimately took place were in fact stopgap solutions rather than the result of articulate policy decisions. In Brussels there is still no official institution that guarantees a long-term and structural commitment to contemporary art. So an *Einzelgänger* like the Raveel Museum cannot disguise the fact that the balance of artistic infrastructure in Flanders is still extremely poor.⁸ It took a long time before we had fully-fledged institutions, let alone appropriate buildings.

Two hours wide or two hours long⁹

Because of the structural lack of important cultural institutions, the artistic sector of Flanders has always been marked by a marginal position and identity. Flanders, and by extension Belgium, is at the heart of Europe, but on the periphery of the international art world. In relation to such artistic capitals as New York, Paris and London, Flanders was and still is an artistic suburbia. We lack such major institutions as the Museum of Modern Art, Tate Modern and the Centre Pompidou. On the artistic world map Belgium is, to borrow Douglas Coupland's description, nothing but "a drive-thru nation".¹⁰ Many interesting people pass through, but they don't stay long. In a special Belgian number of the art magazine *Studio International* in 1974, Barbara Reise, in her article "'Incredible" Belgium: Impressions', linked Belgium's status as an artistic suburbia to its dense highway network. She thereby grasped the problem from a double perspective. While the highway network generated the spatial nebular city, it perpetuated the fragmentation of the cultural landscape as well: according to Reise, the great advantage of the Trans-European highways is that they allow people "to pass through Belgium without stopping".¹¹

When Reise did at long last stop in Belgium, she was full of praise for the 'social aesthetics' to which she was treated. Belgium has always enjoyed a hearty reputation as a result of its many eccentric personalities – artists, private collectors, gallery owners and curators – and unorthodox places. The nebulous government policy has never really stood in the way of a dynamic bottom-up artistic climate. The reception of modern art in Flanders simply took place away from the museums. Flanders – and the cities of Brussels and Antwerp in particular – is widely known abroad for its sparkling artistic scene and its lively activities in contemporary art. However, closer scrutiny of the output reveals that the scene is largely characterised by a well-developed private sector, comprising a great many private initiatives of a temporary and changing nature.¹² These organisations are valuable, but rarely transcend their alternative and improvised character. Moreover, their private basis reinforces the nebulous quality of the Flemish cultural landscape. A mist of initiatives hangs constantly over Flanders, but it rarely gets to solidify. Various organisations sponge on institutions and buildings, but they do not install any proper network that guarantees durable operation. Because of unstable subsidy policy or the simple reason that curators seek out more lucrative and more reliable positions (abroad), foreign art lovers frequently encounter closed doors or a deserted building. Major players disappear from one day to the next, and with them the 'institution' they had founded and developed. This ever-fluctuating web of places is often designated as the key to Flanders' exciting and dynamic artistic scene. But this argument conceals the fact that the government continues taking *ad hoc* decisions, does not make structural commitments and thus only simulates a policy. Symptomatic of this was the collectively reviled system of Cultural Ambassadors which was introduced for some time in the mid-nineties. Flanders' cultural reputation was created by personalities instead of by institutions. The elected ambassadors were supposed to hold up the image of a culturally active hinterland, even if they lacked any proper infrastructure at home.

Miss Europe

Once in a while Flanders tries to lift the mist by turning the cultural spotlight on one particular town or city. It is at the very least remarkable that in the relatively short history of the system of Cultural Capitals of Europe, no less than three cities in the 'Flemish diamond' have been nominated: Antwerp in 1993, Brussels in 2000 and Bruges in 2002. Even though Flanders is no bigger than a handkerchief, it has been a three-time prizewinner in the Urban Miss Europe contest. There may be an overall poverty of infrastructure, there is certainly no lack of festivities.¹³ Exhibitions, recitals, open-air concerts, fireworks and other shows are mounted with bravura. Over recent years our cities have been reigned over by such figures as Tintin, Rubens, Van Dyck, Charles V and Jacques Brel, phenomena like fashion and design, and events like the Battle of the Spurs, the birth of the Belgian railways and the construction of the HST line. In these festivities art always plays a major role. There's always at least one art exhibition that brightens up the event and thematises the occasion. Flemish people seem to be endowed with a genuine cult of and expertise in artistic festivities. Strikingly enough, this 'gift' once again originated in the nebulous nature of the artistic infrastructure. Flanders was a cultural Passaic: there were no buildings or institutions to occupy the 'centre'. Therefore people became competent in the second option that Smithson put forward: the organisation of large-scale artistic events. The obvious absence of any well-developed institutional platform – it was nothing but periphery – or the lack of a high-quality circuit of official museum or exhibition spaces, forced curators in Flanders and Brussels to work 'temporarily' and 'on location': in attics, cellars, flats, abbeys, factories and even churches. Flanders has a remarkable tradition of temporary exhibitions, epitomized by the exploits of Jan Hoet and his Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent. Acting from his headquarters in the rear of the Museum of Fine Arts, Hoet had a double agenda: his activities in the city and abroad had to establish both a home *and* an identity for his museum. During the exhibition 'Chambres d'Amis' (1986), the undeniable climax of this enterprise, infrastructural shortcomings were adroitly charged with artistic ambitions *and* civic chauvinism. Jan Hoet wanted not only to win an autonomous museum but also to give the city of Ghent national and international artistic status. By putting art into the citizens' houses, the whole city was put on show: its streets, its squares and its parks. 'Chambres d'Amis' was undoubtedly an international trendsetter in the policy of city-marketing. Nowadays, every cultural festivity is accompanied by at least one art exhibition in the public space, in the hope that the site-specific efforts of the artists will highlight the specific cultural character of the town or city. The original artistic and institutional motives have yet surrendered to more worldly ones. The rhetoric of crossing boundaries and breaking down the walls of the museum now only serves, in a roundabout artistic way, to brighten up and draw attention to the urban space for a few months. The main outcome of 'Over the Edges', the miserable successor to 'Chambres d'Amis' in the heart of Ghent in summer 2000, was the large number of visitors and the spectacular turnover by the city centre's commercial enterprises.

In the meantime the format has become so well established that just about every small to medium-sized town in Flanders – from De Panne and Watou to Borgloon, from Tielt and Grimbergen to Zoersel – organizes its own open-air or promenade exhibition: in municipal parks, on abandoned industrial sites, on the sea-front and even in roadside chapels. All these exhibitions and art events produce an

overfull summer calendar, but disguise the fact that they merely simulate an artistic platform. Only a haze of artistic activity hangs over our region, which immediately evaporates as soon as the shows conclude. For example, every summer Watou is baptised as the centre of poetry and art. For the rest of the year the silence is audible. In wintertime the stables and farmsteads share the same fate as the pavilions at the Giardini in Venice: only animals are there to occupy them.

Nothing really ends¹⁴

A nomination as Cultural Capital is highly prized by cities that are not especially noted as vibrant centres of culture. Brugge 2002 aimed for example at a “cultural revaluation”, or in other words a release from the city’s reputation as a mediaeval Disneyland for foreign tourists. The European cultural crown provides the licence to deliberately act too big for its boots. But this only becomes a problem when one wants to maintain the ‘same elan’ afterwards. At the start, every ‘intendant’ loudly proclaims that the cultural project will not end when the festive year comes to a close. On the contrary, the aim is always to install a long-term cultural platform. The most appropriate medium to achieve this is architecture: it leaves ‘lasting traces’. What is more, contemporary architecture ‘rejuvenates’ a city. Brand new buildings can be used to re-inject a failing architectural policy, or at least give the impression that it is ‘under construction’. Furthermore, when architecture is brought in to create the urban infrastructure that is missing, the return is doubled. The city gets the concert hall, art gallery or museum it always lacked, while simultaneously the image of architectural renewal is conveyed. This procedure however runs the risk of taking the festivities as the yardstick. You cannot create architecture overnight nor do you get rid of it so easily. By contrast, festivities are exceptional situations. They suspend everyday life for a while and have their own temporal and spatial logic: they take place somewhere and they go by. Then routine takes over again. When compiling the brief for a building in the heat of the preparation of a festivity, one quite often overestimates the actual cultural needs and sensitivities or local capacities and expertise. Afterwards, the programmers lack both the indispensable finances to manage and run the institution, and a sufficiently broad social base or the necessary public to fill the space. One only has to think of the purposelessness of the Millennium Dome in London and the recent problems of viability at the Concert Hall in Bruges. What’s the use of a spectacular dome construction, when you don’t know what to do with it afterwards; why does a concert hall need 1200 seats when, after the opening concert, you can hardly, if ever, hang the ‘sold out’ sign on the door?

Because of their scale, impact and prestige, this sort of commission is very popular with architects. ‘Big buildings’ allow them to make urbanistic statements, reconfigure the appearance of the city and at best even change the skyline. However, when the institution is later experienced as misplaced or superfluous, architecture inevitably takes its share of the blame, whether it is a high-quality project or not. Any building gives shape to the ambitions of the client, regardless of how unrealistic they are. So it is up to the architects to decide whether they consider a critical questioning of the client’s institutional motives to be part of their design task.

In Bruges, the nomination as Cultural Capital was used as a catalyst for contemporary architecture in the city centre. The intention was to enrich the existing heritage with a few high-quality contemporary buildings and thereby cast off the nostalgic and historicist reputation of its architectural policy. The development of a theoretical discourse was discarded in favour of achieving immediate results 'on the ground'. The result of this ambition is all in all unbalanced. In addition to the impressive concert hall, which was forced through at exceptionally high speed for the start of Brugge 2002, Toyo Ito designed an elegant reception pavilion on the Burg, Jürg Conzett designed an ingenious pedestrian bridge over the Coupure and West 8 reorganised the Canal Island together with Poponcini & Lootens. While many people believe 'a miracle has happened', the Flemish Government Architect, b0b Van Reeth, even trumpeted that Bruges had "finally" put itself on the architectural map of the world.¹⁵ But is this really such a groundbreaking accomplishment? Regardless of their architectural qualities and functional location, have these projects really brought about the desired about-turn in architectural thinking in Bruges? None of the three showpieces – the concert hall, the pavilion and the bridge – fit in with prevailing building practice in Bruges city centre – the first because of its scale and the last two because of their exceptional nature and status. This building practice is still dominated by the renovation of terraced houses and plagued by a compulsory facadism. In addition, the three projects clearly participate in event logic: they are outstanding, symbolic and iconic, they occupy unique locations and are designed by top architects. So the question is whether they will generate the desired effect in the long term. Does a project like the Concert Hall really get anything moving in Bruges? To what extent does Ito's pavilion succeed in breaking down the fixation on the image of the typical Bruges terraced house? A project that makes a much more significant contribution to this, though it is not one of list of achievements of Brugge 2002, is the Pandreitje housing complex (Haverhals-Heylen). This ingenious stacking of homes with courtyards proves that in Bruges' city centre, only a stone's throw from the Burg *and* visible from the Halletoren, there is space for contemporary architecture that does not lapse into an historical pastiche of the brick step-gable and red roof-tiles. This project probably brings about the intended change of mentality in the municipal departments, much more than the 'follies', large and small, built for Bruges, Cultural Capital 2002, would ever do. But a housing project is no obvious choice within the logic of events (cultural or otherwise). Housing is not exactly an exceptional programme, and therefore earns the architect little prestige. Even if there's spectacular architecture involved, this often conflicts with the private use. However, an important precedent was provided by the *Blue Moon* project in Groningen in summer 2001, for which no less a person than Toyo Ito conceived the master-plan. Groningen, comparable to Bruges in scale, has a lively tradition of events that put the city and its architecture up for discussion. After a number of events for which top international architects including Zaha Hadid, Bernard Tschumi, Rem Koolhaas and De Solà-Morales were asked to design urban landmarks, mobile theatres (*A Star is Born*) or video pavilions (*What a Wonderful World*), the organizers decided to change course. For the *Blue Moon* project the centrifugal logic of the city festival – both organisational and infrastructural – was completely reversed. The festivities and accompanying festival architecture were given a place on the periphery, on an abandoned industrial site outside the city. In addition, five architectural firms (Toyo Ito, Xaveer De Geyter Architects, Foreign Office Architects, Space Group Architects and Tony Fretton)

were commissioned to design a home with a semi-public programme for vacant lots in the inner city.¹⁶ For spectacular events you had to go to the outskirts. The city centre only offered five sincere architectural schemes that proposed inventive solutions for the combination of housing and urban functions. A housing project like this would have been truly pioneering and revolutionary in Bruges. The results would probably not have been as eye-catching as the current new buildings, but it would have had a more structural, and certainly a more insistent impact on the urban, primarily residential, fabric of Bruges.

But anyway, we can be fairly happy that apart from the oversized concert hall, no new cultural programmes with accompanying buildings have been completed in Bruges. They might just as easily have founded and built a museum of contemporary art. And that would have been the umpteenth small and inevitably provincial museum on Flanders' minuscule territory. It would have perpetuated the Flemish nebular city on both the cultural/institutional as on the urban/infrastructural level.

What now?

Up to the present, an *ad hoc* cultural policy with limited resources has been pursued in Flanders. The abundance of regulations that currently apply in this field hardly indicate an overall vision. In the Ministry of the Flemish Community, the same policy material is worked on by a great many actors at an equal number of government levels, so that there is little or no possibility of mutual rapport, let alone an integrated policy plan. This is reflected in the deficient state and miserably low architectural allure of the cultural infrastructure. But the question is whether we should continue lamenting all this. Six editions after the first architectural year book (of complaints), it is perhaps the moment to take a different tack. Is there any credit to be gained from an epithet like 'Flanders Cultural Nebular City'?

A recent report by the Centre for Cultural Sociology at the University of Leuven, commissioned by the Flemish Visual Arts Initiative (IBK), discusses the possible direction Flanders might take in terms of culture, and the visual arts in particular, in the future.¹⁷ How do we deal with the present patchwork of museums, collections, artists, curators, galleries, artists' initiatives, magazines, private collectors, foundations and so on? Should we still try to go against the tide, or can we turn the present situation to our advantage? In other words, should we still try to occupy a central position in the international art world or can we resign ourselves to our present peripheral situation? Can we instrumentalise the suburban status and nebulous nature of artistic Flanders? According to the authors of the report, Pascal Gielen and Rudi Laermans, it is of little avail to compare the Flemish art scene with London or New York. These world players offer no useful measure. They plead (with a deliberately paradoxical formulation) for the development of a 'central-peripheral' position *and* identity. This does not mean that the cultural nebular city has to be maintained, but rather that a number of its crucial features need to be settled in the overall policy, the amalgam of institutions and their infrastructure. We should no longer try to compete with eminent artistic capitals when it comes to institutions and events. It may be a pity that we have no Tate Modern, Museum of Modern Art or Centre Pompidou in Flanders, but we should no longer moan about it. The basic fact that Flanders lies at the 'centre of Europe' but on the

'periphery of the international art world' sets out the basic markers for a different and perhaps much more interesting mental framework. Gielen and Laermans suggest that Flanders no longer has the desire and ambition to develop into a capital of the contemporary art world. It is possible to exploit the disparate qualities of the Flemish artistic scene, but only if the region as a whole presents itself as a transit zone and residential area. It is time we take advantage of Reise's insight that the highway network is Belgium's greatest asset. We have to make sure that the interesting people who pass through Flanders *do* stop and interrupt their journey for a while. Hence they need reasons and amenities that distinguish their residency in Flanders from both their starting point and destination. This first and foremost requires a thorough change of mentality at the policy-making level. The decision to consolidate Flanders as a nebular city for the visual arts implies that we programme accordingly. The centre remains vacant and is no longer defined by major institutions. Big events also decline in importance as, following Smithson's remark on Passaic, the suburbs exist without them.¹⁸ The emphasis is put on less spectacular things such as the establishment and validation of study, research and discourse. Instead of competing in the exhibition rat race, Flanders can present itself as a place where the hellish tempo of the art industry is briefly suspended.

In the other sectors of the cultural scene, such as dance, theatre and music, it is of equal importance that one examines *and* decides to what extent the nebulous articulation can be exploited. These sectors also need a coherent vision of future policy, on both the institutional and infrastructural level. However, if all the cultural actors support the project for Flanders Cultural Nebular City, this will have considerable consequences for architectural practice and production. It simply means that in the future we will also miss out on the prestigious cultural projects. But the question is whether we thereby lose that much. Will the decision to erect no more major cultural buildings in Flanders indisputably signify a loss for architecture? We probably have to alter or learn to rethink its role in the cultural landscape. Flanders is in any case the clearest proof that in cultural policy architecture is always both at play and at stake.

¹ Robert Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey (1967)' in Jack D. Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996, pp. 68-74.

² In addition, competitions have frequently been employed to legitimise the often still uncertain construction, to mobilise political will or even to generate public support. It is a common fact that organisers hope that as soon as a project has assumed concrete form, vanity and desire will take the upper hand and transform into the will to build. Large budgets are often put by for a competition, while the budget to build the institution and to let it function afterwards are by no means assured. This strategy is extremely popular in Belgium, as demonstrated by the competition for the new KunstenForum De Krook in Ghent. Despite the fact that the minister considered "the dossier for the Forum not yet to be ripe for a definitive decision" and that "the basis is interesting", "but that the project is "not yet fully-matured," a budget of half a million Euro was still made available for an international architectural competition (*Beleidsnota Culturele Infrastructuur 2002-2004*, pp. 5-6). The participants in this competition are Rem Koolhaas, Toyo Ito, Claus & Kaan, Samyn & Partners and Neutelings-Riedijk. The last of these must nevertheless be aware of the disadvantages of this scenario, since it was also used for the Museum aan de Stroom or MAS in Antwerp. Neutelings-Riedijk's design, which was proclaimed the winner of the final stage as early as 2000, is for many reasons, mainly budgetary and organisational, still waiting to get under way.

³ Geert Bekaert, *Hedendaagse Architectuur in België*, Lannoo, Tielt, 1995, p. 57. In the meantime, to this list must be added the ModeNatie (Marie-José Van Hee, 2002) in Antwerp and the MAC's (Pierre Hebbelink, 2002) in Le Grand Hornu. An examination of the successive Architecture Yearbooks yields an equally short list. The only museums included are the Stedelijk Modernmuseum in Hasselt (Simoni, 1995) and the Raveel Museum in Machelen-aan-de-Leie (Stéphane Beel, 1999). One notable 'laureate' is the renovation and conversion of the Belgian pavilion in the Giardini in Venice (Georges Baines, 1997).

⁴ Steven Jacobs, 'Bakstenen in de Vlaamse nevelstad', in *Jaarboek Architectuur Vlaanderen 1998-1999*, Ministry of the Flemish Community, Brussels, 2000, pp. 39-42.

⁵ On the dream of a bicomunal cultural project and a bicomunal centre in Brussels in particular, see Dieter Lesage, 'De bicommunautaire conditie/La condition bicommunautaire', in Bert Balcaen, Wouter Davidts, Dieter De Clercq, Lieven De Boeck and Tijn Vanmeirhaeghe (eds.), *B-SITES. Over de plaats van een kunst- en onderzoekscentrum te Brussel / A propos de la place d'un centre d'art et de recherche à Bruxelles*, Brussel/Bruxelles 2000, Vakgroep Architectuur & Stedebouw, Ghent University, Brussels/Ghent, 2000, pp. 19-26.

⁶ For this see Maarten Delbeke, Arthur Wortmann, 'Architectuur in Vlaanderen: vechten tegen onveranderlijke scènes en ongeboren catastrofes', in *Archis*, no. 10, 2000, pp. 8-9; Paul Vermeulen, 'Culturele Centra. Een reis door de nevelstad', in *Archis*, no. 10, 2000, pp. 12-22.

⁷ Karel Geirlandt, 'Belgian Commentary', in *Studio International*, 183, no. 937, 1971, pp. 148-149.

⁸ In the Ministry of the Flemish Community's *Beleidsnota Culturele Infrastructuur 2002-2004*, the Raveel Museum is even referred to as a 'happy exception'.

⁹ From the title the curator Barbara Vanderlinden gave the contemporary art section in 'The Fascinating Faces of Flanders' exhibition, organised on the occasion of the world exhibition in Portugal in 1998. See the catalogue *The fascinating faces of Flanders : 58/98 two hours wide or two hours long*, Stad Antwerpen, Antwerp, 1998.

¹⁰ Douglas Coupland, 'The New Season / Architecture', in *The New York Times*, 11th September 1994: *Drive thru-ness and fluidity*: 'Steven drives along the conveyor belt hyperfreeways of the new Europe and thinks of Belgium as the first drive-thru nation.'

¹¹ Barbara Reise, 'Incredible' Belgium: Impressions', in *Studio International*, 188, no. 970, 1974, p. 117.

¹² For an analysis of the role and influence of private initiatives in the Belgian art world, see Koen Brams & Dirk Pültau, 'Het sublieme succes. Over de popularisering van de hedendaagse kunst in België sinds 1992', in Bart De Baere, Jan Denolf, Luk Lambrecht & Paul Tanghe (eds.), *Decennium II*, Ludion, Ghent, 2004.

¹³ Nor did this escape the attention of Barbara Reise ('*Incredible' Belgium: Impressions*, p. 118). According to some of the people she encountered on her way through Belgium, this is a question of a broadly recognised '*savoir-vivre*': '... the only thing Belgians automatically agree on is the value of living the good life. "What's that?" I asked. "Good food, good drink, and a festive celebration whenever possible.'

¹⁴ From the song title by the Belgian rock group dEUS. This song was played at the close of the farewell ceremony for Bruges Cultural Capital 2002 in the new concert hall.

¹⁵ The Flemish Government Architect b0b Van Reeth, as quoted in Hugo De Greef (ed.), *Een verhaal in feiten*, Brugge 2002, Bruges, p. 10; *De Volkskrant* headline was 'the three wonders of Bruges'.

¹⁶ These semi-public programmes comprised, among other things, a creche, an IT company and a café. Only the homes by Foreign Office Architects, Space Group Architects and Tony Fretton have so far been built. For a description of the *Blue Moon* project see Harm Tilman, 'Potenties van vergeten plekken. Het versterken van multifunctionaliteit', in *De Architect*, October 2001, pp. 28-43.

¹⁷ Pascal Gielen & Rudi Laermans, *Een omgeving voor kunst. Een toekomstperspectief voor het beeldende kunstlandschap in Vlaanderen*, Lannoo/Centrum voor Kunstsociologie KULeuven/Initiatief Beeldende Kunst, Tielt/Leuven/Ghent, 2004.

¹⁸ Robert Smithson, *ibid.*, p. 72.